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Transfigurings – beauty, wonder and the noumenal

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Paper presented at the 'Transfigurings: The World, Wonder and Beauty' Symposium, Durham University, Centre for Medical Humanities and Institute of Advanced Studies, 14 June 2012.

Encounter (1) The ash tree at twilight – an epiphany explored

I was simply standing in the garden one evening looking at the late spring sky above me, through the canopy of a large ash tree whose every leaf and twig was picked out in black against the indigo sky. As my eyes adjusted to the dwindling light, the three dimensional array of the tree's infinitely elaborate structure fixated me, and I was able to savour its precise and almost granular penetration of the air around it. The space it occupied in turn seemed to take on the quality of a mould, a mould of minute intricacy whose every hollow channel was perfectly fitted by the filigree of tree-stuff that had, as it were, been poured or breathed into it. Although in one sense a more unscientific view of the tree's actual growth could hardly be imagined, the perception of the tree's infusing a space that was ready to receive it does have a picturesque relation to the Darwinian thought that living things exist simply and precisely because they can, and that every grain of organic nature occupies that location to which it is, at the time of occupation, most perfectly fitted. Finally, like so much aspect-perception, this perception too could after a while be switched at will with the ordinary perception of the tree as fixed, the fluid air flowing and wrapping gently around it. It was, if you like, an altered conception of space and form, and it was most definitely wonderful while it lasted.

What I mean by 'transfigurings'

One of the fundamental groups of questions in philosophy concerns the relation between on the one hand the world as the object of our knowledge, and on the other hand our nature as knowers, in some sense shaping the world that we take ourselves to know. We are, after all, part of the world. Does the way we know the world conform to the way the world is, objectively and independently of us? Or does the world itself conform to the ways in which we and our knowledge and perception are structured (whether biologically, or culturally, or both)? Do our minds fit the world, or does the world fit our minds? Both the sense of beauty and the sense of wonder sharpen this question – they make it more than usually intense, and – if this be possible – more than usually important. The world seen under the aspects of beauty, under the aesthetic gaze, and the world seen under the aspect of wonder, seen in a state of wonder, seems intensified and changed. Whether this means the world itself is changed, or that we ourselves are changed, is a moot point within this fundamental philosophical debate. But clearly *something* is changed. For the purposes of our conversations today, I'm going to call such changes 'transfigurings'.

Seeing things differently

In seeing something transfigured, we see it changed from its prior state or aspect. In seeing the beautiful, or in seeing the wonderful, we are also seeing something that is extraordinary. If our staple diet of experience were full of wonder, or full of beauty, then we should hardly notice the wonderful or the beautiful. But they are categories that pick out sharp contrasts from the usual or the ordinary. Seeing beautiful or wonderful aspects of the world means seeing the world differently from before. A number of interesting questions immediately arise: is the difference something that's available for everyone to see, or does it reside within the beholder's eye alone? How might it be shared and conveyed? Is it permanent? Is the difference something that we can learn to see at will, habitually? Or must beauty and wonder always take us by surprise, unlooked-for (like, perhaps, humility)? I'm not going to address these questions directly, but we may return to them in discussion. Meanwhile I want to suggest a provisional distinction between beauty and wonder, leaving them nonetheless as powerful agencies of transfiguring. I'm going to suggest that the aesthetic transfigures the world *within* reason, and that wonder transfigures it *beyond* reason. I now have to say what I mean by that, and doubtless I'll also have to row back a little from it; but I hope the point of the distinction will achieve something.

The aesthetic – the world transfigured within reason

The aesthetic – 'beauty' is the name of its most cherished bestowal – changes the world's aspect. We see the world differently when we discern the aspect of the beautiful. We bring to the world a framing and an editing that illuminates some things, mutes others, shades others out altogether, and discloses a pattern or a figure (a trans-figure) of elegance and symmetry, or their acute contraries, where previously in un-altered vision we saw something different, in some sense something lesser, something workaday, utilitarian, un-joined, or joined for merely practical purposes. The world experienced as beautiful is continuous with the world as we previously experienced it – transfigured 'within reason' as I'm calling it – but the change involves our seeing differently and engaging the world-as-beautiful more exuberantly and intently. Its value, its very thing-ness (or ipseity) is intensified.

Wonder – the world transfigured beyond reason

By contrast I suggest that the world seen as wonderful is liable to be *discontinuous* with the world-as-mundane. The change is a change in us as much as in the world, perhaps, but – for the wonderer – the change in the world is radical; perhaps even irrevocable. Wonder does not isolate the extraordinary from the ordinary, as curiosity might. Rather in wonder the ordinary becomes extraordinary. Wonder defies the ordinary; it dissolves the ordinarieness of what we see as wonderful. Wonder invites us to suspend some of our prior categories of experiencing and knowing. I suggest that the world experienced in wonder is to that extent *discontinuous* with the world of ordinary experience. This is a transfiguring 'beyond reason'. We confront a change in what we take the world to be, or in how we take it

to operate, or in how we realise it can be accessed. Some fraction of the world becomes – even if only for a moment – newly present to us.

What I mean by wonder – a provisional definition

Writing on the place of wonder in the clinical encounter,(1) I have suggested that wonder characterises

...a special kind of transfiguring encounter between us and something other than us. Wonder is a very particular attitude of special attentiveness (very much an attitude rather than an emotion) that arises within us, an attitude prompted by circumstances that may be entirely ordinary yet, through our active and responsive imagination, yield an object in which the ordinary is transfigured by and suffused with something extraordinary as well. The attitude of wonder is thus one of altered, compellingly-intensified attention to something that we immediately acknowledge as somehow important – something that might be unexpected, that in its fullest sense we certainly do not yet understand, and towards which we will likely want to turn our faculty of understanding; something whose initial appearance to us engages our imagination before our understanding; something at that moment larger and more significant than ourselves; something in the face of which we momentarily set aside our own concerns (and even our self-conscious awareness, in the most powerful instances).

More could be said of course, but it seems to me that this will do well enough for our purposes today.

Encounter (2) The shared world of un-shareable experiences

Sometimes the Kantian thought, that the world cannot be as it appears to us because it cannot be only as it appears to us, comes vividly to life. Standing on a sandy beach with a seagull screeching and cavorting over my head, the thought is forced upon me that we are surrounded by moving perspectives upon the world, each carving its own track across and through the three-dimensional field of possible perceptions. This 'carving' is true not only of me as an individual, nor simply also of other humans whose perceptions could be very like mine, but also of other kinds of creatures entirely – birds, fish, countless thousands of insects and rodents and worms along the shore not so many metres away from me – whose perceptions must be very unlike and in most cases unimaginably unlike my own.

We all move (walk, swim, crawl, fly) in a three-dimensional field of perceptual possibility, intercepting the radiated light and sound and warmth and pressure and other waves as they coincide in any particular point. We swim seamlessly from one such point to its immediate neighbour, too quickly to be consciously aware of the minute gradations of change. Every wave of light or sound or heat or pressure radiates from a point at the centre of what we might call 'a sphere of perceivability'. For our practical purposes there are infinitely many such points, their correspondingly many spheres overlapping and interlocking in an unimaginably

complicated symphony – the natural, spontaneous, organised display of reality, in a simultaneous multitude of forms that satisfy the perceptual apparatus of every creature moving within and across the field.

The seagull arrows across this field along an invisible track that I could never follow; and if by some contrivance I could do so, it would be at speeds very different from the gull's; and if by further contrivance I could mimic exactly the gull's track and speed and survive the experience, I would still realise perceptual possibilities constrained by my own senses and not by the gull's. I can't experience her world nor she mine; yet we live in a common reality underlying (or displaying or expressing itself as) both our worlds – and untold billions of other worlds, all shared to varying extents but no two identical.

On the world, the body, the mind and experience

One of Kant's many seminal realisations was that the way we experience the world – the general *forms* that all our experiences must necessarily take – cannot themselves be experienced, yet can still be deduced (2) (see especially pp 120-175). The three chief examples are space, time, and causality (the relation of causes and effects), framing the form of all our experiences. We know about these conditions through reflecting upon what our experiences are like, and indeed *must* be like. But we cannot have direct experience *of* space, time, or causation – only their results. We experience events in time and objects extended in space, but we have no experience of time as such, rather than of events *in time*; and we have no experience of space as such rather than of objects *in space*. Crucially, space, time and causation for Kant are forms imposed upon our experience *by our own minds*. They are part of the apparatus of experience – and are presupposed by, and lie behind rather than within, any actual experience. They are themselves nowhere to be found (even the term 'nowhere' *presupposes* space, and 'finding' *presupposes* both time and causation!).

Then following Kant, one of Schopenhauer's many seminal realisations was that our minds are the way they are through arising within us as part of our distinctive material nature.(3) As Simon Blackburn puts it so succinctly, for Schopenhauer the mind is '*subservient* to the life of the organism'(4) – the mind is controlled by and functions within the conditions imposed by our material make-up, which includes not only the Kantian categories of thought but something more obscure (and partly darker) as well, a more primal and general urging which Schopenhauer sees as the operation of something that he calls '*will*' (rather misleadingly, as it turns out(5)). In realising this material conditioning of the mind, and in particular its hidden-ness from our experience, Schopenhauer was of course anticipating one of the fundamentals of psychoanalytic doctrine.

Now put these two realisations together. Our material nature, our lives as organisms of a particular kind, frame and constrain the nature of our minds. But in their turn, our minds frame and constrain the kinds of experiences that we can have. Since (through our material nature) the world does govern the form that our minds take, then our minds do 'fit the world'. Yet at the same time, the way the world appears to

us *in experience* is also governed by the framing conditions imposed by our minds, something we can deduce but not directly experience. So in this larger sense, our minds do govern the form in which the world appears to us – the world does ‘fit our minds’. Between them, Kant and Schopenhauer seem to have provided a synthetic account of the source, of our experience of the world and our place within it, that some think has still not been surpassed almost two hundred years later.

The world as presented; the world as capable of presentation; the world behind presentation

Following Kant and Schopenhauer, we realise that the world is necessarily capable of presenting itself to us in ways that we are evolved to perceive it – otherwise those perceptions could not be obtained, and they *are* obtained; but this is true both of me as a human and also of the seagull (and the fish and the worm), each of *them* equipped to perceive the world in ways that I am not. The world supports the irreconcilable perceptions of us all, fish, beetles, birds, people.

That the world supports all of these experiences simultaneously – and, for each experiencer, exclusively – shows that none of us has nor could have, even in principle, anything more than a minutely partial experience of the world. All these experiences are true and real, but none conveys anything like the whole display of the world; which is to say, that none conveys more than a fractional representation of reality, a fractional representation of the world as it is.

In a philosophical context, the radical incompleteness of perceptual experience matters because it affirms one view of reality against others, proclaiming that whilst the world has a reality that is independent of us, underlying our very real experience, and presenting itself to us in ways that we are capable of apprehending, it also speaks to other creatures in ways in which it must remain silent to us. Beyond that fraction of the world’s appearances that we are fitted to receive, the world is unknowable. (For a genuinely thrilling, as well as convincing, pursuit of this conclusion, see Bryan Magee’s philosophical autobiography, which remains in my view the most irresistible invitation to philosophy available.(6))

Conceiving the noumenal

I think we’ve now arrived at the daunting thought that there is, after all, a world ‘as it is in itself’ forever beyond our experience of it; through reasoning, we can affirm that there is; and through reasoning we must confront the fact that we can never know what it is like (though we can say a good deal about what it is *not* like). I grant that this conclusion is daunting and controversial, but I find myself driven to sharing it nonetheless. If we are to consider at all the notion of a reality underlying the world of experience, Kant’s and Schopenhauer’s term for it – the noumenal – will do as well as any other. (They differed somewhat about what could be said about it, but the differences needn’t concern us today.) The *noumenal* is, then, that aspect of reality that must underlie our experiences, although it can never feature in our

experiences. (Our experiences, in turn, constitute that aspect of reality that is presented to us – the *phenomenal*.)

A familiar objection to the idea of the noumenal is that it involves needlessly multiplying the number of entities in existence; the short reply is that it doesn't, but simply acknowledges the limitations upon how much of reality it is open to us to experience.⁽⁵⁾ (See especially chapters 5 and 6.) A second familiar objection is that it commits us to making moves in *metaphysics* and that to make moves in metaphysics is somehow discreditable; the short answer is that not only is metaphysics not discreditable, it is not even avoidable in thinking about our experience of the world: any attempt to say what reality consists in is by definition a story in metaphysics, and this is just as true of the view that the world of appearances is all that there is to reality, as it is of the view that appearances cannot be the whole of reality.

A third objection is that it is of no practical use to think about such questions. There are two responses to this. The first is that it was thinking about precisely such questions that led Kant and Schopenhauer between them to make what Magee regards as the greatest advance in western abstract thought for two thousand years, understanding clearly for the first time the relation between experience and reality.⁽⁶⁾ The second response is that not all important questions need practical uses for their justification. Aesthetic theories about the nature of beauty would lose their point, perhaps even their very meaning, if they were confined to questions of what is merely useful.

Finally, it may be objected that the noumenal is a mystical, spiritual, or even religious notion which rational people should leave well alone. I hope I've already shown how 'the noumenal' names an aspect of reality that we disclose *precisely* by reasoned argument. However it might be that cold reason is sometimes augmented by unsettling experiences – such as the experiences of the world *altered through* beauty and wonder – whose attempted description does seem to border on the mystical. I've described two personal instances so far, without yet acknowledging this. Let me briefly describe a third such experience, and see what we might make of it.

Encounter (3) The 'St Anne' Prelude

In March of 2010 I had occasion to take part in an event in Durham Cathedral, at the end of which I had to join a procession walking ceremonially out of the sanctuary. As we rose and began walking, the organ sounded – the processional voluntary was a piece of music I'm reasonably sure I'd never heard before, though it was instantly recognisable as Bach. However, and much more important, it was music that sounded as though it announced the beginning and ending of all music. The opening chords, consisting of the simplest elements in diatonic music – the harmonic framework that underlies the music with which we are familiar in the West – seemed to present those elements for the very first time. After the first four bars, my heart stood still, and I even momentarily stopped walking – very awkward if you are marching in a procession! Somehow I recovered my wits, but I can remember nothing but the music until we were outside the Cathedral. The music was Bach's

Prelude and Fugue for organ in E flat major, known popularly as the 'St Anne'; I daresay some of you know it, and if you do then you might wonder how I as a reasonably active musician myself could have survived until the age of 54 without coming across it. If you are not familiar with it, then how can I convey to you its sublime majesty and authority?

If you have not heard the St Anne Prelude, imagine that you are climbing a cloud-covered hill on the other side of which lies a city you have never seen. As you reach the top of the hill, the clouds part and before you lies a landscape, and a city within it, of such breathtaking beauty that it makes everything you've seen up till that point seem drab and dull. Or imagine that you witnessed the first coming-to-life of human figures that you had previously supposed to be statues, incapable of movement. Or imagine that you are in a darkened library, with a rare and vital book open before you, but it is unreadable in the gloom – then the heavy curtains open and sunlight falls full upon the page. Or that the light shone in all the time from outside, yet you had never learned to read – and in a moment's inspiration the power of reading fell into your mind. Or, perhaps closest of all, imagine that you stood before a mighty instrument – a cathedral organ will do fine – that had never been played, nor anything like it. And then for the first time there or anywhere in the world it burst forth in sound.

This music was like that, like all of those. Even now – after perhaps a hundred listenings and attempted playings on my part – in hearing or even merely imagining in my head the gravity of those opening bars, I feel as if music has been revealed to me for the first time. I feel as though I now have the source from which all other music comes, and the landmark towards which all other music points and in relation to which all other music is orientated. I would even go so far as to say that, if my life ended tomorrow, it is more nearly complete as a result of hearing and understanding the opening of the St Anne Prelude than it would have been otherwise.

Wonder: glimpsing the noumenal?

I earlier described wonder as transfiguring the world *beyond* reason. The world seen – or heard – as wonderful is discontinuous with the world as ordinarily experienced. It is as though in wonder we glimpse something of a structure or order underlying the reality of ordinary experience: an order normally inaccessible to us, making an alternative sense out of chaos. I do not suggest this is always a happy experience. For the poet Philip Larkin, the glimpsing may be terrible – disclosing the contingency of our individual consciousness in a blind and inexplicable materiality, for instance. Here is how he describes the casual sight of a gravely ill patient being loaded into an ambulance.

Then children strewn on steps or road,
Or women coming from the shops
Past smells of different dinners, see
A wild white face that overtops
Red stretcher-blankets momentarily
As it is carried in and stowed,

And sense the solving emptiness
That lies just under all we do,
And for a second get it whole,
So permanent and blank and true. [my emphasis](7)

Experiences of wonder come in many forms; beauty may not always accompany them, nor (of course) the reverse. But they have in common the sense that corner of a veil is momentarily lifted – before falling back into place.

A concluding thought

In this sense the world is if anything even more full of wonder than it is of beauty; but both involve a transfiguring that, in turn, involves us in seeing differently. Whether in the process we are ourselves transfigured is a question for another day.

HME, 14th June 2012

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